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SUBJECT: NIGERIAN RULING PARTY CONVENTION SURPRISE

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CLASSIFIED BY DCM ANDREWS. REASON: 1.5 (D).

11. (C) Summary: President Obasanjo's renomination is highly probable but not certain. The 3,349 delegates to the ruling PDP's national convention began voting around sundown, but the process could drag into Monday morning. On convention eve, the President's renomination seemed assured (Ref A). However, his strategy of alliance with the governors lost its legs when most Southeastern and South-South Governors turned on him. Other governors joined in. At one point, 16 of the 21 PDP governors were estimated to have shifted allegiance, with former Vice President Alex Ekwueme the beneficiary. By Saturday morning most observers gave Ekwueme the inside track. That entire day transformed into an endless stream of meetings in numerous locations, with key players moving about, facilely proposing deals and making promises to advance their interests. Alternatively cajoling and arm-twisting governors and delegates, Obasanjo slowly recovered ground. VP Atiku Abubakar's decision not to jump ship stalled the rebellious governors' momentum. By Sunday morning, relieved Presidential advisors claimed to have the Governors back in line. While Atiku may have wanted to abandon Obasanjo, he feared the consequences of openly challenging his President. The PDP will emerge from this convention even more profoundly divided than it was going in. End Summary.

12. (C) Going into the convention, Obasanjo believed his re-nomination was assured. Despite a strong challenge by former Vice President Alex Ekwueme (Chairman of the PDP Board of Trustees and a founding member of the party), Obasanjo and his advisors were confident. Party apparatus in ANPP- and AD-controlled states was firmly behind the President. He had met with PDP Governors (who in most cases exercise great influence over their delegations) December 30 and thought he had their support. At that meeting, Obasanjo distanced himself from reports that he wanted to disqualify some Governors from contesting in the general elections despite their having "won" (ref C) renomination. Obasanjo promised that his "incumbents pact" with the Governors remained solid. However, the harmony of that meeting began to dissipate when, soon after returning home, the governors started receiving reports from inside the Presidency that Obasanjo had lied to secure their support: he still intended to push the PDP to jettison some governors after he secured the nomination. Faced with Obasanjo's presumed insincerity, South-South governors met Thursday night, deciding the best way to protect their seats was to attack Obasanjo's.

13. (C) The South-South Governors' anger was also stoked by Obasanjo's failure to sign the amended oil dichotomy bill (septel), the hot button issue in their region. Two of the leaders of this gubernatorial insurrection were Delta's James Ibori and Edo's Lucky Igbinedion. Ironically, when they had thought Obasanjo would sign the bill, this same duo had proposed during a PDP National Executive Committee (NEC) meeting in November that Obasanjo be renominated "by consensus" by the NEC.

14. (C) It was not hard to entice other governors onto the anti-Obasanjo wagon. Southeastern Governors had their own grievances. Moreover, there was the long-standing agitation for an Igbo candidate. With former Vice-President Ekwueme now the main challenger, these Igbo Governors were under pressure at home to support this ethnic favorite son. A special assistant to Abia State Governor Kalu told us that Kalu's presidential aspirations for 2007 made him ambivalent about fellow Igbo Ekwueme taking the 2003 PDP nomination. Ekwueme's ascendancy would virtually dash any hope of Kalu gaining the Presidency as the rotation would

not return to the Southeast for over twenty years. However, after having been the most vocal advocate for an Igbo president, Kalu's greatest fear was being branded a crass hypocrite if he failed to back Ekwueme. By the time the convention began on Saturday morning, several northern Governors, including Adamawa's Boni Haruna, Vice President Atiku's acolyte, had joined the rebel camp.

15. (C) Although the governors had decided to oppose the President, they had not by early Saturday morning decided whom to back. Some of them wanted to put two of their own number against the incumbents (an idea they had reportedly considered prior to the December 30 meeting). This concept never took hold because of disagreement over composition of the ticket. Also, it was clear that a role had to be found for Ekwueme. The governors then asked the VP to contest against Obasanjo, according to Atiku's special advisor. The Advisor said Atiku offered to take the governors' advice but only if they publicly and unequivocally called for Atiku's candidacy before he left the President. The advisor claimed the Governors' rejection of Obasanjo was driven by the President's unpopularity. They feared he would not only lose his general election but would take them down with him. As of late Saturday, however, the advisor thought the governors would back Ekwueme and that he would win the nomination; to restore some party unity in the wake of a divisive fight, Ekwueme would name Atiku as the Vice-Presidential candidate and Atiku would accept.

OBASANJO BATTLES BACK

16. (C) Jarred by the prospect of humiliating defeat, Obasanjo began to act more like a politician than a potentate on Saturday. With Atiku in tow, he made the rounds to visit state delegations and even to confer with influential individual delegates. For instance, to the important South-South delegates, he promised to reverse his stance and sign the oil dichotomy bill next week. He also moved decisively to reconcile with the governors, lunching with them as a group, later visiting individually with several. There were plausible but unconfirmed reports of money changing hands. Obasanjo and his minions also used strong-arm tactics. Part of his not-so-gentle suasion with the governors was the threat to dedicate the powers of his office to scuttle the reelection of those who did not support him.

17. (C) Obasanjo even swallowed his pride by asking to meet the leadership of the National Assembly, the den of some of his staunchest opponents. Reportedly, Assembly members were told the President would open the pork barrel by releasing funds for "constituency projects" in exchange for support. By Sunday morning, Obasanjo's overtures seemed to have some effect. Key Obasanjo allies were smiling, confident most governors had returned to the fold.

EKWUEME TRIES TO HOLD ON

18. (C) Having lost at the last minute to Obasanjo at the 1999 convention, Ekwueme was doing his best to repay Obasanjo in the same coin. Ekwueme actively lobbied Governors and delegations. He also engaged the other presidential contestants, Barnabas Gemade and Abubakar Rimi, reportedly offering each the Vice-Presidency in exchange for their support. (Rimi probably controls about 200 votes; Gemade might have 50.). However, Ekwueme's most serious attentions were directed toward Vice President Atiku, whose influence over the party faithful could swing several hundred delegates and sway the thinking of the governors. Ekwueme made several attempts to meet Atiku, who demurred, fearing Obasanjo's reaction to such a meeting at such a tense moment. Working through intermediaries, Ekwueme offered the second slot on his ticket to Atiku. Media reports allege that Ekwueme offered, should they win the general election, to resign as President in 2006 so that Atiku could run as an incumbent in 2007. However, an Ekwueme insider denied his candidate made such a desperate proposal. He stated the proposal surfaced from Atiku's side; but to protect their boss's flank from Obasanjo's anger, Atiku's men attributed the idea to Ekwueme.

ALL ROADS LEAD BACK TO ATIKU

¶9. (C) Because of his influence over individual delegates and governors in his PDM faction of the party, Atiku may determine the final direction the convention's wind blows. In some ways, his is an enviable position; but from another angle, it is akin to walking a minefield. The pressure on him not to make a misstep is intense. The ambitious yet cautious Atiku would like the presidential nomination. However, Atiku dare not challenge Obasanjo directly, knowing Obasanjo would use the tools of the Presidency to destroy Atiku for what Obasanjo would see as a monumental betrayal. Both prior to the convention and into the early hours of its second day, Atiku obviously was groping for some device or pretext that would enable him to separate from Obasanjo without being accused of having scuttled the President's re-nomination.

¶10. (C) The Governor's eleventh hour insurgency momentarily must have seen like the answer. Publicly, Atiku announced he stood with Obasanjo but his assistants were busy talking to the President's opponents. Moreover, the Atiku's public statement of loyalty was less than ringing, and observers knew that Adamawa Governor Haruna would never have joined the rebellion without his mentor's approval. However, what first seemed like a gift became a millstone around the Vice-Presidential neck. Obasanjo put Atiku on the spot by making sure that Atiku joined his efforts to regain gubernatorial support. The more Atiku was seen helping Obasanjo, the more Atiku's potential supporters in the anti-Obasanjo camp pressured him. Some of his followers threatened to abandon him unless he joined Ekweume or challenged Obasanjo outright.

¶11. (C) Jumping from Obasanjo's ship to Ekweume's was not ultimately very attractive to Atiku. First, there was that little problem of Obasanjo feeling betrayed and then acting on those feelings; it is generally believed that Obasanjo has sufficient evidence of Atiku's corrupt practices to ruin the man. Second, Atiku does not fully trust Ekweume. Former Head of State Babangida and probably National Security Advisor Aliyu Mohammed, two of Atiku's political rivals in the North, are reportedly backing Ekweume. Atiku has to be concerned that, at Babangida's urging, Ekweume might dump him once the PDP nomination was secured.

¶12. (C) When not pounding the turf with Obasanjo, Atiku spent the remainder of Saturday with allies and aides discussing how to walk his tightrope. By Sunday morning, Atiku had apparently decided, for better or worse, that he was married to Obasanjo and that Ekweume was not a sufficiently strong suitor to steal him from a jealous spouse.

BUYING TIME

¶13. (C) Obasanjo used influence over the party machinery, especially party Chairman Ogbem, to buy precious additional hours on Saturday. Delegate accreditation was scheduled for Saturday afternoon. However, PDP officials in charge of the process were Obasanjo loyalists. Sensing the momentum had shifted to Ekweume, they slowed accreditation of delegates. While the voting was not set until Sunday in any event, the accreditation delay pushed the start of balloting from late morning to early evening, giving the Presidency some extra time to canvas for support. It also provided the psychic benefit of regaining control of what had seemed to be a runaway train, denting Ekweume supporters psychologically. Some of them began to lament Obasanjo that had the tools to orchestrate his victory regardless of the delegate count.

THE VOTE AND ITS UNCERTAINTY

¶14. (C) With Atiku and most governors back in the fold, it appears Obasanjo has regained the momentum and probably the lead. However, the vote tonight will be by secret ballot (sort of -- delegates will vote individually but must place a thumbprint on the ballot). Since their votes cannot be definitively attributed without thumbprint analysis, delegate behavior will be hard to predict. No one has done an accurate poll of the individual delegates. The working assumption has been that the delegates will follow their governor's lead. While that may have been true coming into the convention, it may not be quite as valid now. The governors' initial defiance opened the way to delegates to assert their own independence. With the cork now off, it

will be hard to put all the delegates back in the bottle. Most of the delegates we talked to favored Ekwueme. It is uncertain whether the governors can make most of them change course at this point. The delegates have been talking to each other, and this has given them a power and momentum of their own. Also, we cannot gauge how committed the Governors are to their supposed reconciliation with Obasanjo. If the reconciliation was just superficial, then they might not try hard to instill voting discipline among their delegates. The Obasanjo camp's claim that victory is certain is based on the false tally that the pro-Obasanjo governors will carry all their delegates. We think the actually voting will be more complicated and ambiguous. Obasanjo will probably win a first-ballot victory, but the overwhelming 75%-plus first-ballot vote of confidence some in his camp are predicting may well escape him.

¶15. (C) Gemade and Rimi, while neither has a chance, also are wild cards. Between them, they might control up to 300 delegates. If they get the higher figure and Ekwueme holds onto anti-Obasanjo delegates, Obasanjo might even be denied a first-round victory. Should that happen, the struggle for their second-round support would be intense.

A FRACTURED PARTY?

¶16. (C) The winner will face a party riven by factionalism and the contention of this convention. Large sums are said to have been spent to cajole delegates (between 20 and 60 million USD, according to most estimates), and the loser's backers will have to be compensated if they are to return to the PDP fold and support the winner in April's general election. Also, Obasanjo reportedly made promises (e.g., to sign a bill that would give coastal states at least 13% of the federal revenue derived from oil wells out to 200 NM) to secure support from one part of the country (South-South) that will not sit well with those states (all others except Ondo and Lagos) whose shares of the future revenue pie will thereby be reduced proportionately. Assuming he emerges victorious from the convention, Obasanjo will have to work furiously to ensure that he can legitimately win at least one-third of the popular vote in not less than 25 states and to prevent mass defections to other parties.

JETER